Super Hornet Smack Down!

By AD1(AW) Joel Leaver, VFA-102

It was a beautiful Saturday morning on the flight deck of USS *Kitty Hawk* (CV-63), and Diamondback 106 was getting ready to launch. As the plane captain gave the signal for the pilot to move the control stick to the right, a troubleshooter from another squadron tried to walk under the exhaust nozzles. The left horizontal stab hit the troubleshooter and knocked him down to the deck. His limp body came to rest against the deck-edge combing.

Our line LPO and two other ground-crew members helped the shipmate down into the catwalk. He was lucky; had he gone one more foot, the ground crew would have had to tend to injuries from both a "stab smack" and a six-foot fall to the grating of the fueling station in the catwalk below.

This incident was the result of a greater problem. For some reason, people do not give aircraft-control surfaces the respect they deserve. I spend more time preventing people from walking under the stabs than any other danger area around a jet. Any hydraulic-powered movable surface has an inherent risk that must be weighed. A Super Hornet horizontal stab has 3,000 psi of hydraulic pressure, and its trailing edge can move 10 feet per second. Also, the trailing edge is only 3 feet from the deck at full deflection. No one who works on the flight deck is small enough or fast enough to stand under and clear that hazard. So why do people continue to dart under this area?

Those of us who work in NAVAIR know that all of our publications and instructions are "written in blood." Will it take the death or crippling injury of a hard-charging Sailor who was taking a shortcut under an aircraft-control surface to open everyone's eyes?

Only trained and qualified flight-deck personnel should pass behind turning aircraft, and then only on a very limited basis. There are times when a shortcut may seem to be in order, but at what cost? Always weigh the risk-to-reward ratio. In this situation, the risk of being knocked unconscious by a horizontal stab to save 10 seconds by passing under the nozzles, rather than going around, is not an acceptable trade-off. ORM is not a catch phrase; it is not something to be used when it's convenient.

This time, the troubleshooter wasn't seriously injured, but he certainly could have been. A broken neck and paralysis for the rest of his life are just two of the thoughts that flash through my head each time I see someone go underneath the stabs while a jet is turning.

Is 10 seconds of saved time worth the possibility of missing the opportunity to teach your children how to dance, ride a bike, throw a football, shoot hoops, or swing a baseball bat?

"Never in a million years!" is my answer. What's yours?

Photo by PHAN Kristi Earl